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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000271

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM PHUM PINR MR

SUBJECT: THE CONTRADICTIONS OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE
IBRAHIMA SARR

REF: 86 NOUAKCHOTT 04024

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The first person to officially announce his candidacy in the upcoming June 6 elections, Ibrahima Sarr is a study in contradictions. A long-time advocate for Afro-Mauritanians, many of his own supporters and peers now accuse him of selling out by working with the military. Recognizing that the upcoming elections will be a "masquerade," he chooses to participate anyway, despite the intense divisions his candidacy has sown within his own party. End summary.

¶2. (C) PolOff and PolAsst met with AJD-MR president Ibrahima Moktar Sarr April 13. Sarr, a Pulaar, officially announced his candidacy for president in a press conference April 11, the first to do so. (Note: As of April 15, only Sarr and General Aziz have officially announced their candidacies. End note.)

¶3. (C) The past: Delivering an extended discourse on Mauritanian history "to make sure the Americans understand my position," Sarr established his credentials as an Afro-Mauritanian leader and militant for their causes. In 1986, he participated in the publishing of the "Manifesto of the Oppressed Black Mauritanian," which led to charges from Taya's government of "publishing a document containing falsehoods, spreading hatred, and calling for disorder" (Ref A). He was arrested along with several other Afro-Mauritanians, and spent 5 years in prison. After his release, he participated in various political movements. He was vice president of APP (Messaoud Ould Boulkheir's party) during the 2005 coup that ousted President Taya, but resigned from the party over differences on issues such as the return of refugees -- "I didn't want to give carte blanche to Aziz and Vall for their transition plans," he said. As he put it, he was "continually pushed and urged by friends" to stand as a candidate in the 2007 elections, and entered the race at the last minute. Without the backing of a political party or other source of support, he managed to obtain 8% of the vote (5th place out of 19 candidates). This result was clearly a source of pride to him, and he mentioned it several times throughout the meeting.

¶4. (C) The present: Sarr put forth many of the usual

pro-coup arguments: the FNDD does not recognize the "reality" of the situation; President Abdallahi was "groomed" by the military and there was no real democracy under him; Aziz is not the cause of Mauritania's problems and sanctions; the international community did not understand Mauritania, and so on. On the other hand, Sarr acknowledged that elections in Mauritania, including the upcoming June 6 elections, are merely "a matter of money and tribes," going so far as to call them a "masquerade." Nevertheless, Sarr claimed he had a chance of winning, and maintained with a straight face that if he did win, "Aziz would respect the results." (Though Sarr later said that Mauritania needed a strongman in the vein of Tunisian President Ben-Ali, implying that Aziz was just such a figure.) When asked about Ba M'Bare's imminent accession as the first Afro-Mauritanian president, Sarr said it would be merely symbolic. M'Bare would not actually have any real power, BUT his time in office would be "important in changing the mentality of people."

¶5. (C) His candidacy: Sarr stated the number one problem in Mauritania was how to correct the disparity of power. "The racial question," he said, "underlies everything." Using the platform from his 2007 presidential bid as a starting point, Sarr outlined four changes he wanted to make to the constitution: (1) Declare that Mauritania was not just an Arab country; (2) Recognize all three African languages (Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof) on an equal footing with Arabic; (3) Formalize the sharing of power (for example, the President of the Republic and the President of the National Assembly could not be from the same ethnic group; and (4) Abolish slavery

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once and for all. Sarr went on to say that he was "better placed than Aziz" to resolve the "passif humanitaire" because he was himself a victim of previous governments' racial policies. Aziz took a first step, but "I have suffered, I'm in the opposition, and I'm more credible." Comment: Sarr has indeed suffered in the past, and Sarr may be more credible than Aziz on racial issues, but given his willingness to deal with the junta, his claim of being in the "opposition" is laughable. End comment.

¶6. (C) Junta financing: Despite widespread rumors in the press that he has received money from the junta, Sarr denied receiving any junta financing, claiming that as yet he did not have the means to pay the candidate fee. (Note: Potential candidates must pay a 5 million ouguiya fee (approximately \$19,000 US) to stand as a candidate. If they receive more than 2% of the vote, the fee will be refunded. End note.) Sarr went on to say that the June 6 date for elections was too soon, and not enough time to organize a campaign (and presumably, to secure financing as well).

¶7. (C) Divisions: A few days after Sarr announced his candidacy, a wing within his AJD-MR party publicly denounced him, even going so far as to release a statement calling him the "former president" of the party. Like many political parties at the moment, AJD-MR is split into a camp favoring participation in elections, and a camp favoring a complete boycott. By announcing his candidacy, Sarr has laid these divisions bare within his party. Other criticisms have emerged from anti-coup local media and other Afro-Mauritanian leaders. In an April 14 meeting with PolAsst, FNDD activist and PLEJ party president Ba Mamadou Alassane, a Pulaar, asserted that Sarr had lost much credibility among Afro-Mauritanians since he had begun dealing with Aziz. Because Sarr had not rejected the coup and was actively working with the military, the "majority" of Pulaars were no longer with him, Alassane maintained.

¶8. (C) Comment: With his name dropping of important people he has met with and self-proclaiming himself leader of the Afro-Mauritanians, Sarr has an apparent egotistical streak. He also appears to have mastered the art of double-think, able to hold conflicting views simultaneously (such as acknowledging the elections are flawed, but participating

anyway). His frequent assertions that his party has no mayors or seats in Parliament, and the fact that he has no real hope of winning, lead one to believe that he hopes to gain something from Aziz in return for participating in the June 6 elections -- perhaps a ministerial post. Sarr seems content to pursue his candidacy and gain what he can from the process, even at the expense of alienating many of his own supporters and sowing discord in his own party. End comment.

HANKINS